Hilltop, a Hospital and a Sanctuary for Healing

By George W. Paulson, MD

There was once a hospital building in Columbus that proclaimed the largest building under one roof in America. Some readers may remember its looming shadow, its crenellated towers, and its crowded halls. Hilltop, a Hospital and a Sanctuary for Healing, is the title of a new publication by George Paulson, MD and Marion Sherman, MD. Dr. Sherman is the Medical Director at Twin Valley Behavioral Healthcare, the successor to the old large state institution (Central Ohio Psychiatric Hospital) that no longer exists. Dr. Paulson is a long-time associate of the MHC.

By 1838 William Awl, MD, a true Columbus hero, persuaded the legislature to build the first state-supported hospital in Ohio. It was called the Ohio Lunatic Asylum and was designed solely to treat the mentally ill. Hilltop also once implied the state mental hospital and its 350 acres. The label was sometimes used pejoratively, as in, “If you don’t behave better I’ll send you to the Hilltop.” The authors retain the word Hilltop, and argue that the castle on the hill embodied idealism and a vision for adequate humanitarian care for those who were mentally ill.

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sold for $25,000 and a new hospital was built on the hill to the west of the capital. The new hospital, dedicated by Hayes in 1870, embodied the famous Kirkbride design, intended as a “moral architecture” to match the contemporary dream of “moral therapy.” The facility was originally designed to house up to 800 patients, with most living in private rooms. The building housed 1,350 patients by 1900 and by 1935 was home to 2,932 patients. It became an almost self-supporting campus where the patients worked, walked the grounds, or just “set” waiting to live out their days in the slowly decaying hospital. Many patients were sheltered for decades in the hospital, and in any one year, over 100 patients might have died. They received whatever was considered the best therapy at the time, including the administration of over 100 lobotomies in the 1950s, and 14,275 individual electroconvulsive therapies in 1955. The patients were protected while they were confined. Since poor, elderly, frail, and helpless persons were particularly likely to need admission, some patients received adequate basic medical care for the first time in their lives. Among the active members of the staff were respected doctors in private practice as well as academic physicians. Many of the full-time staff lived on the grounds with their families.

In addition to the education of residents, students, nurses, and chaplains, other accomplishments deserve to be remembered. Probably no other state hospital had three superintendents who went on to become president of the American Psychiatric Association. Dr. Awl was a founder of the Association. Another staff member, Samuel M. Smith, MD, never held the position of superintendent, but became the first Professor of Psychiatry in America. He was twice chosen as the Dean of Medicine at Starling Medical College and was the Surgeon General of Ohio during the Civil War. A statue of his abolitionist countenance still faces the South in front of the area once known as Upham Hall, now labeled in the OSU phone book as “Harding Hospital.”

Lithium was first approved as a therapy for use in Ohio at Hilltop. The concept of the limbic system was propounded at the state hospital by one of its several excellent pathologists. For many years 90% of all psychiatric care in Columbus was offered at the Hilltop. At least 35,000 patients were treated through the years, and most were returned, improved, back into the community.

Deinstitutionalization was a major trend in psychiatric care in the last half of the twentieth century. It meant both the demolition of the large state hospitals and the release of the patients back into the public sector. The old Kirkbride hospital was torn down in the 1980s and early 1990s. One might ask “what were the reasons for deinstitutionalization?” The process itself began before the advent of modern psychotropic medications, but new hope of effective therapy accelerated this process. Lawsuits, federal policy requiring that funds to be directed to community clinics, and policies forbidding support of the large hospitals made major impacts on deinstitutionalization. Inability to allow patients to work in order to maintain the hospital, union pressure, rise of nursing homes, and the idea that mental illness was not biological but reflected defective social and environmental stresses also contributed.

Is there still a presence on that ridge where so much delivery of humane care once occurred? Indeed there is. In 2006 over 1,000 patients, now referred to as “clients,” were admitted to the 175 beds in the combined civil and forensic units called Kosar, and another 82 persons were referred to the forensic prison unit on the same grounds. For non-forensic clients the stay tends to be 14 days or less, and frequent readmission (also known as recidivism) is a major concern. Once there were over 800 aged patients at Hilltop, at Kosar now less than 3% are over 65. Do the truly and severely mentally ill get adequate care? Were there unintended consequences of the dramatic transfer of responsibility for the mentally ill to the community? Well, perhaps that merits another book.

Contact NAMI Ohio to purchase copies of the book for $15 each at amiohio@amiohio.org or 1-800-686-2646. All proceeds from book sales support NAMI Ohio.

The MHC’s 10th Anniversary Campaign to End Soon!

The Medical Heritage Center (MHC) was founded in 1997 with the mission to collect, preserve, and promote the rich health sciences history of the central Ohio region. The MHC advisory committee, comprised of health care professionals from across the area, named 2007-2008 as the 10th Anniversary Campaign year.

Contributions made during this time will make a difference in supporting the legacy of the Center and ensuring its growth in the years to come. So far, over $10,000 has been donated to this cause!

10th Anniversary Donors, giving at the level of $100 or above will be acknowledged in a future newsletter. Their name will be inscribed on a commemorative plaque to be installed in the MHC in 2009. There is still time to donate and become part of the anniversary celebration. Take the time to fill out the form below to make your donation to preserve the past for future generations!

Join in the Celebration!

You can help support the work of the Medical Heritage Center by considering a contribution in the form of a tax deductible gift. All gifts received will be placed in the Medical Heritage Center general development fund, which will support the collections, scholarship, and public programming of the Medical Heritage Center.

Contributors giving at the $100 level and above will become members of the Curator’s 10th Anniversary Circle, which includes recognition in forthcoming Medical Heritage Center publications. Circle-level supporters will also have their names added to a commemorative plaque to be located in the Medical Heritage Center in 2009. They will also receive a copy of the book, The Second Blessing: Columbus Medicine and Health, The Early Years.

To donate please clip and return this form to: Medical Heritage Center, Prior Health Sciences Library, 376 West Tenth Ave., Columbus, OH 43210

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Curator’s 10th Anniversary Circle

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*Contributors who donate gifts of $100 and above will receive a copy of The Second Blessing: Columbus Medicine and Health, The Early Years (a retail value of $40) in the mail.

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